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Education and Democracy: Back to the Future

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I know it's 2008, but the prospect of a new administration—and a new U.S. Department of Education—has me thinking about 2001.

I have to admit that when the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act was passed seven years ago, I paid little attention. As a high school principal, I had other things on my mind, like developing a literacy program, finding funding for our students to do more internships, setting up senior project night, finalizing next year's schedule, and scraping together enough dimes from vending machines to send our juniors on college visits. Federal legislation was the last thing on my mind; I was interested in the quality of work going on in our classrooms.

When I did note what was going on, it seemed benign, and maybe even beneficial to my work. A new push to support schools that served our most needy students would be a good thing, and according to our staff members, it would also mean a few dollars for the high school from funds that were usually just targeted to the elementary schools. Not a bad deal, I thought—slightly more money for all our schools, a new fund for the literacy work we were doing, and an ambitious federal bill that would not meaningfully impact my daily work as an educator.

Clearly, I was wrong.

Seven years after the fact, what haunts me most about NCLB's sound and fury is that this legislation—far from signifying nothing—has helped lock in place the very structures of schooling we most need to change. Here are a few examples:

Commissions, college presidents, and business leaders have rightly called for schools to help students think more broadly, systemically, creatively, and collaboratively. Yet federal and state accountability systems rely on high stakes standardized tests as the only measure of student progress and school accountability. In these tests, students are not asked to demonstrate any of these higher-order thinking skills. Instead, to build in more time for test prep, many schools have abandoned the very programs that best develop these skills, such as internship programs, interdisciplinary curricula, field trips, and labs.

Everyone from Oprah Winfrey to Bill Gates has suddenly realized that a large number of kids drop out and never graduate. (Pardon me if I wonder why it took them so long to find this out—could it be where they live?) Talk with drop-outs and they will tell you they leave school because they are bored, they feel invisible, or they have family needs they must attend to. The solution? Not very effective. State after state has added more course requirements for graduation, leading to less flexibility for the engaging experiences that we know help keep kids in school.

Nothing rings truer to parents or kids than the fact that good teachers make all the difference. However, enshrined in NCLB and state curriculum models are strategies designed to make teaching “teacher-proof.” Scripted curricula (most clearly seen in reading programs), and increasingly frequent testing are tools to control teaching rather than professionalize it. No wonder so many people are leaving the field.

As a new administration takes shape and debates intensify over the future of federal and state education policies, it's important to remember that none of this is new. For decades, we have relied on test scores as outcomes, increased graduation requirements, and tried to teacher-proof our classrooms. None of these steps have helped engender the school renewal we seek.

We founded the Forum for Education and Democracy to try and turn around this misguided agenda for our

schools. The Forum's Conveners, staff members, and I are driven daily by the experiences and dreams of families, children, and educators around the country. We are also tired of those folks being led on by politicians who are more concerned with sound bites and talking points than they are with doing the right thing when it comes to our children.

At the Forum, we are committed to taking seriously the mission of our public school system—the development in all of our children the tools necessary for lifelong learning and engaged citizenship. To that end, we hope to do three things well in the coming months and years:

- **Advise** thought leaders and policy makers about what characterizes engaging, equitable, and high-functioning schools;
- **Advocate** for policies that help schools refocus on the whole child, prepare young people for democratic citizenship, and restore a balanced approach to whole-school assessment and accountability; and
- **Amplify** the voices of practitioners, young people, and partner organizations so that the stories of educators and students can become the central data points that shape how policies are made and clarify what purpose they should serve.

To do this work effectively, we need to hear from you. Imagine if you were in a hearing on Capitol Hill. It's a new day in Washington, and you're there because the new administration has said publicly that it intends to listen to educators at length before proposing any new legislation. This is your chance, and they have asked you three questions:

What are the best examples of high-quality teaching and learning you've had the privilege to experience? What are the key attributes of these experiences, and how can policies help support more of these experiences across the country?

Does the approach to whole-school governance in your school help or hinder the learning needs of children? If it helps, why and how does it help? If it hinders, why and how does it hinder?

In what ways is your school's commitment to equity and access made more difficult by federal and state policies? How do those policies need to change so your school can more effectively meet the needs of all children?

We've created a special online discussion area so you can share your ideas with us and see what others have to say as well. Please, visit <http://network.fivefreedoms.org/forum> today and share your voice.

Together, let's make sure the lessons of the last seven years aren't forgotten, and let's help the next administration craft policies that help us ensure all young people acquire the skills and self-confidence they need to be seen and heard—both in their schools and throughout our democratic society—in meaningful, responsible ways.

Visit the Forum for Education and Democracy online at www.forumforeducation.org for news about Washington D.C. policy briefings, blog posts, access to the Forum's newsletter, policy statements, research reports, and more.

The Five Freedoms Project

The Five Freedoms Project is a national organization that equips local school leaders with the leadership development, coaching and support they need to address two of America's greatest challenges—improving the performance of our public schools, and strengthening the quality of our civic discourse—at the same time.

To support its growing national community, the Five Freedoms Project offers two online resources—an official web site (www.fivefreedoms.org) and an online network (network.fivefreedoms.org) of educators,

students, and citizens who share a commitment to First Amendment freedoms, democratic schools, and the idea that children should be seen and heard.

A virtual “public square” for the 21st century, the Network is made up of individuals from different places, perspectives, and points of interest. Join today (it’s free) and share your voice!

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